

# Foundations of Religious Belief

Henry Churchill King \*

1905

264

I find myself, in my theological thinking, inclined to work more and more directly from the fact of Christ himself—his life, his teachings, and especially his consciousness—as the greatest and most significant fact in the world, and so our best light on living, and our best proof of even the existence of God, in the full Christian sense. The argument goes upon the simple assumption that, if we are ever to discern the real nature either of true living or of the ultimate world-ground, our best light must come from the greatest and most significant facts. For myself, I have no doubt that Christ is the most significant of all facts known to us, and therefore the best basis for direct and decisive

---

\*This text is an excerpt from Calvin Goodspeed et al., “The Foundations of Religious Belief. A Symposium,” *The Biblical World* 25, no. 4 (1905): 258–66. The original version is available on the Internet Archive. This version updated June 1, 2017.

265 inference both as to true life and as to the nature of the world-ground. The argument does not at all go, it should be noticed, upon any assumption of the arbitrary authority of Jesus but simply upon the significance of what he is. Any authority given him must be based wholly upon the fact of is in fact found to be. I count the fact of Christ the greatest proofs of the completely satisfying God—the proof most to produce conviction in the mind of a man who has come moral self-consciousness.

One may argue, similarly (but less decisively, so long as Christ is omitted), from the whole historical revelation of God—from the line of the prophets and from the great spiritual seers of all time—as the greatest and most significant historical movement of the world. Persons are incontrovertibly the greatest facts and the most significant data; and to ignore them is to ignore the most decisive evidences in our search for God and for the secret of living. We are not to suppose that the argument from such personalities is less significant than the argument from things. God is best known in his completest manifestations.

It is just at this point that the surpassing importance of the Bible comes out for me—as the book that puts us in touch with the most significant religious development and the most significant religious personalities of history, culminating in Christ, and so contains the record of the pre-eminent meetings of men with God, of the progressive revelation of God to men. In this progressive revelation, all other stages must be judged by the culmination in

Christ. Christ is Lord in the Bible as well as out of it; and its supreme service is its placing us face to face with him. Treated as a book throbbing thus with personal life—as a book of honest testimony to experience, broad and deep, in the moral and spiritual life, and approached through a historical method—I have no doubt that the Bible will increasingly prove what the free critic, Edmond Scherer, claimed:

The Bible will ever be the book of power, the marvelous book, the *book* above all others. It will ever be the light of the mind and the bread of the soul. Neither the superstitions of some nor the irreligious negations of others have been able to do it harm. If there is anything certain in the world, it is that the destinies of the Bible are linked with the destinies of holiness on earth.

I find myself, also, inclined to give increasing weight to that which is rational, not merely in the narrower intellectual sense, but in the broader sense of that which is really worth while, as judged from the point of view of man as a feeling and willing, as well as a thinking, being.

266

In the study of individual theological problems, I am inclined to use increasingly, as the surest key of interpretation, man's own personal life and his deepest experience in personal relations—feeling sure that that which is nearest and most real and

most significant to ourselves must prove the surest key in the interpretation of the deepest in God and in other men.

I aim, therefore, to require of myself, in all my theological statements, that these statements shall be manifestly real, rational, vital; thoroughly ethical, never mechanical; and capable of verification in the honest experience of the individual. And I feel increasingly that the two considerations that must especially move us in coming into the reality, first of religion, and then through religion into reality in our theological thinking, are: first, we must put ourselves persistently in the presence of the great facts of the spiritual world in voluntary surrender to them; especially remembering how inextricably the reality of the spiritual world is bound up in persistent loyalty to the ethical demand; second, we must follow the laws of the spiritual life. This means, it seems to me, that we must persistently fulfil the conditions of a deepening personal relation with God, only being sure that we do not transfer to God the limitations of the finite. The precise conditions of the spiritual life can be so pointed out and fulfilled, and we may count upon the result. Every bit of experience in human relations thus throws light upon the divine. The ethical and religious are bound up together, and all life becomes truly one—a life of learning to love.

I regard as highly important, though supplementary, the light that comes on the inductive side from natural science, including psychology, and from his-

tory, and from the attempt of philosophy to think the world through into a true unity. I need hardly say that I have to think of these things as ideals, rather than as accomplished results.